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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a staff development model that was designed and implemented to address the professional training needs of staff working with autistic children in rural, northeastern Oregon. The county coordinator of child development and school psychology and the regional autism specialist held monthly, multidisciplinary professional meetings to provide training, problem-solving strategies, and networking opportunities for staff members. The meetings focused on autism and were structured to facilitate cumulative learning. Teachers reported that they and their students benefited from the meetings and requested that meetings resume at the beginning of the next school year. The success of these meetings was attributed to information presented in manageable amounts, opportunities for discussion and follow-up, and the availability of the regional autism specialist who assisted teachers in implementing new classroom strategies. The training, education, and organizational styles of the two facilitators responsible for conducting the meetings complimented one another. This combination of abilities aided communication between the facilitators and participants. The meeting schedule of 1 hour was maintained to accommodate most staff members who had to travel a minimum of one-half hour to participate. This model continues to be successful for staff working with the increased autistic population in this rural area. (LP)

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IMPROVING SERVICE TO STUDENTS WITH LOW INCIDENCE HANDICAPS THROUGH ON-GOING MULTIDISCIPLINARY STAFF DEVELOPMENT

In rural areas, schools frequently find it difficult to meet the challenge of providing quality educational programs for students who have low incidence handicapping conditions. School personnel typically have limited training and experience with which to understand and meet the needs of these students. Teachers of "low incidence" children are usually separated from each other by significant distance and have minimal opportunity to network with each other. The responsibility for acquiring skills necessary to meet a child's needs typically falls on one teacher and information does not usually filter to the rest of the school staff.

A staff development model is presented that was designed and implemented to address training and professional support needs in a rural section of Eastern Oregon. The model was developed out of a specific need to improve service to students who have autism and this population will therefore provide the example for this presentation. The model can, however, be applied to any handicapping condition.

The Setting

Umatilla County is located in rural Northeastern Oregon. Twelve school districts, serving a total of approximately 11,000 students, receive specialized educational support services (e.g. child development/school psychology, speech and language, vision, physical and occupational therapy, mental retardation/developmental disabilities) through Umatilla Education Service District. The Education Service District (ESD) office is located in Pendleton, which is centrally located to the rest of the county. In addition, Oregon provides specialized consultative services to students who have low incidence handicapping conditions (e.g. autism, hearing impaired, visually impaired) through six regional programs. The regional program that provides service to Umatilla County is housed in La Grande, Oregon, which is approximately 60 miles from Pendleton, on the east side of the Blue Mountains.

Austism Services in Umatilla County Prior to 1989

Prior to the 1988-89 school year, there were, on average, three students with autism who were being educated in the Umatilla County schools. The twelve local districts had established a consortium to help financially support the needs of autistic students in the county. The consortium funds, used to hire classroom assistants to implement the IEP, were managed through the ESD Special Education Program. I, as Coordinator of the Child Development/School Psychology program (one of several ESD Special Education programs), provided the supervision for these assistants. Consultative services, which included training and support, were provided to each child's teacher, classroom

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assistant (if there was one), and parents by the regional autism specialist at least one time each month. It should be noted that this specialist covered four other counties in addition to Umatilla County.

During the 1988-89 school year, the number of autistic students in Umatilla County increased from five to six, a trend that was to continue. The six students resided in the county's three most populous areas: Pendleton, Milton-Freewater, and Hermiston. Three classroom assistants were needed to support the educational programs of these students. Training continued to be provided to teachers and assistants during consultation visits from the regional autism specialist. This very slight increase in the number of autistic students began to stress a service delivery model already short on resources. To illustrate, the regional autism specialist had to drive for almost two hours to get to any of the schools outside the Pendleton area. In addition, the number of students in mainstream settings with classroom assistants had increased and more consultation time was required to support these placements.

By the end of the 1988-89 school year, it had become obvious that the current service delivery model was no longer meeting the needs of teachers and students. The number of teachers and classroom assistants involved with autistic students had increased to the point that it was impractical to expect the regional autism specialist to continue to be able to provide adequate training and support for staff while problem-solving difficulties that arose in various student programs. Principals were asking for additional help. Teachers and classroom assistants were expressing frustration, feelings of isolation, and the urgent need for additional information and training. It was clear that a more collaborative relationship between regional, ESD, and local district personnel would be required if these needs were to be addressed.

Research Regarding Effective Staff Development Programs

Research indicates that effective staff development programs "reflect the needs of participants over time and provide for continuous growth and learning" (Hinson, Caldwell, Landrum, 1989, p. 48). Training that is presented in small "chunks" over time allows the participants to build on their experiences and cumulative learning. Duttweiler (1989) suggests that staff development that is planned and organized around a central theme is more effective than "one-shot" seminars because it allows participants to progress through the awareness phase of learning to in-depth exposure, which can then be integrated into practice. King (1988) reports that in rural settings it is particularly important that staff development is collaborative and internal; building on the strengths and capabilities of the teachers and focusing on school-based teams.

Development of an On-going, Multidisciplinary Staff Development Model

Using the research on effective staff development practices and the needs expressed by school personnel as a guide, Janet Todd, who was the new regional autism specialist serving Umatilla County, and I evaluated the existing autism service delivery model. We identified two major components that had become particularly problematic. More specifically, we noted that staff training was reactive and accomplished on an individual basis in response to a problem.

There was no real opportunity to provide proactive training. Furthermore, the regional autism specialist had become the main source of support for school-based staff. It was difficult for other building staff to provide the kind of support needed by these teachers because they did not fully understand the complexity of instructing an autistic child. Significant distances between districts similarly isolated teachers of autistic students.

Janet and I decided to utilize the format of a monthly professional meeting to address training, support, and networking needs. The meeting was designed to be multidisciplinary so as to promote team-building at the school level and networking at the county level. We settled on a one-hour monthly meeting because this would afford sufficient opportunity for on-going training, problem-solving, and networking without imposing a time burden on staff. Janet would continue to consult with each student's teachers but her emphasis would now be on helping the building-level team implement the information from the professional meetings and engage in team problem-solving.

We began the 1989-90 school year with a revised service delivery model and eight autistic students in the county. These students were in the same three cities but were now spread across six different classrooms in five different schools. Six classroom assistants were required to support the educational programs of all eight students. The students, who ranged from kindergarten to junior high, were a very diverse group. Some students were operating at a level which enabled them to function in a regular classroom setting with the support of a classroom assistant. Others needed the structure and predictability of a self-contained classroom, as well as the support of a classroom assistant. The concerns that had been expressed regarding consultation, training, and support were even stronger as the new school year commenced. School district principals strongly supported implementation of the new model.

The Monthly Professional Meetings

The staff members involved with each autistic student's program were invited to the monthly professional meeting. Staff members included the following individuals, depending on the student's placement: principal, special education teacher, regular classroom teacher(s), classroom assistant, speech and language clinician, school psychologist, counselor. Janet and I served as trainers and group facilitators during the meetings. The agenda for each meeting allowed time for dissemination of new information as well as discussion of successes and challenges being faced. The meetings also provided the opportunity for staff to learn about other autistic students in the county and thereby gain perspective on their own student. Teachers of younger children increased their understanding of the challenges facing older autistic students, which enabled them to anticipate possible difficulties at various developmental stages and plan proactive programs.

As suggested by staff development research, the topics presented at the monthly meetings focused on autism and were structured so as to facilitate cumulative learning. The first part of the year was spent establishing a solid understanding of autism. The initial meeting presented an overview of autism and subsequent meetings addressed specific topics within this overview, e.g. communication, behavior, learning characteristics. Staff members were encouraged to share observations of their students which illustrated the

information being discussed. Once the basic principals were understood, specific strategies were introduced to help teachers further increase their instructional effectiveness. Topics included: functional analysis of behavior, structured teaching, proactive and reactive behavior management strategies, and relaxation training (for both students and staff). A portion of Janet's consultation time was spent in the classrooms helping the teachers implement the appropriate strategies, thereby facilitating integration of new information into daily practice.

We periodically solicited feedback from participants in order to ensure that the professional meetings were addressing staff needs. This was accomplished using both discusssion and written formats. The response we received throughout the year indicated that teachers found the information extremely helpful, particularly because Janet was available to help them implement technical strategies in their classrooms. Staff members also indicated that the support and networking opportunities were invaluable. They reported that the networking and team-building that took place during the professional meetings enabled them to function as a team back in their schools. Teachers received more support and felt empowered to meet the needs of these students. They also began to share information about autism with other staff members at their schools. At the end of the school year many stated that they felt it had been the most successful year they had experienced. Teachers further reported that several parents had made similar comments about the growth they had witnessed in their children. The request was made that the meetings resume at the beginning of the next school year.

Essential Components of the Staff Development Model

As the year progressed, Janet and I realized that the success of the professional meetings could be attributed to several key factors.

1) The information was presented in manageable amounts, with opportunities for discussion and follow-up. Janet facilitated implementation of new strategies by being available to help teachers in the classroom.

2) Janet and I complimented each other in terms of training, experience, and organizational style. Janet has a strong teaching background in special education, particularly in the area of autism and severe disabilities. Her organizational style is linear, task oriented, and planned. I have a strong background in school psychology and regular and special education. My organizational style tends to be holistic, process oriented, and fluid. We discovered that in addition to having acquired expert knowledge, it is essential that staff development facilitators possess the skills to facilitate group process. The participants in our professional meetings learned to trust each other and share difficulties as well as successes. Janet and I found that together we were able to model collaboration, provide information, and facilitate open communication in the meetings. We believe that it would be difficult for one facilitator to accomplish this alone.

3) Staff members recognized that the professional meetings provided the opportunity to obtain valuable information and support. They also realized that they played a vital role in the success of the meetings. This group of professionals actively engaged in discussions, maintained the dynamic nature of the meetings, and provided feedback and direction regarding their needs.

4) Janet and I faithfully maintained the meeting schedule. We started promptly and ended on time. There was always the opportunity to stay and visit but staff knew the formal meeting would last exactly one hour. This was extremely important because the meetings were held after school in Pendleton and most staff members had to drive a minimum of one half hour in order to attend.

Current Status and Future Direction

There are currently fourteen autistic students in Umatilla County and the number continues to increase. Students now range from early intervention to high school. The consortium established by the local school districts continues to provide funds for the eight classroom assistants needed to work with these students. The service delivery model implemented during the 1989-90 school year is still in effect. Professional meetings are held each month and attendance continues to be high. Janet has been able to increase the amount of time she spends in Umatilla County because of the significant student increase. She continues to help teachers implement and refine effective teaching practices and promotes team problem-solving when difficulties arise.

The first autism meeting of the 1990-91 school year posed a challenge to Janet and I. The professional group now includes extremely knowledgable staff as well as those who are completely new to autism. We therefore made the decision to draw upon the knowledge and experience of the staff from last year when providing fundamental information to new members. We now promote structured discussions around a topic rather than providing a "lecture." This format is meeting with approval from both new and experienced staff. Networking and support continues to be a valued component of the monthly meetings.

The current staff development model provided the means to address a need that became apparent during the 1989-90 school year. Trained substitutes were not available for the autism classroom assistants. Using some of the materials developed for the professional meetings at the beginning of last year, the ESD provided training for a number of substitute assistants. Several of these individuals now voluntarily attend the monthly meetings in order to network with the assistants for whom they substitute and to increase their knowledge and skills.

Needs will continue to be identified and staff will continue to change. We have found, however, that on-going, collaborative, multidisciplinary staff development provides the tools and support needed to develop and maintain quality programs for autistic students. We believe the model can be applied to other "low incidence" children.

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